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SUBJECT: GEORGIA STRONGLY PROTESTS RUSSIA'S WITHDRAWAL FROM
CIS SANCTIONS ON ABKHAZIA

11. (SBU) Summary: On the evening of March 6, President Saakashvili told the Ambassador that Russia had unilaterally announced its withdrawal from the 1996 Decision by CIS member states to impose sanctions against Abkhazia. Saakashvili condemned the action, which he believed would lead to the Russian annexation of Abkhazia. Georgian officials also reacted strongly publicly. Foreign Minister Bakradze called Russia's decision "illegal and very dangerous" and Speaker of Parliament Burjanadze characterized it as "unacceptable." Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili, speaking at a March 7 meeting with the Group of Friends of the Secretary General, reaffirmed Georgia's support for the proposals for economic development of Abkhazia that he presented at the recent Group of Friends meeting in Geneva, but said Russia could no longer be considered by anyone to be an honest broker in Abkhazia. Also on March 7, the Georgian MFA released a statement accusing Russia of infringing on Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While the media has focused on the economic impact of the removal of sanctions, the 1996 Decision also explicitly prohibits many other linkages to Abkhazia including the sale or transfer of military equipment to Abkhazia and the establishment of official diplomatic or representational offices in Abkhazia. End summary.

Georgian government deeply concerned about Russian withdrawal

12. (SBU) On the evening of March 6, President Saakashvili called the Ambassador to tell him that the Russians had formally announced their withdrawal from the 1996 Decision by CIS member states to impose sanctions on Abkhazia. He also told the Ambassador that his military experts had informed him that the Russian PKF were digging trenches in the Abkhaz conflict zone, which suggested that they were preparing for reinforcements. Saakashvili said the Georgians are viewing these actions with grave concern and feared they might precipitate a crisis. Following his conversation with Saakashvili, the Ambassador spoke with Special Representative of the Secretary General, Jean Arnault, who expressed alarm at the Russian actions, noting that the 1996 Decision not only applied to economic activities but military supplies and equipment as well. He told the Ambassador that UNOMIG has been monitoring the trench digging and would provide an update. On March 7, a UNOMIG official played down the issue of the trenches, noting that their patrols have seen Abkhaz, not the Russian PKF, doing maintenance work on existing positions with the exception of one position. He did not believe that the trench digging constituted a violation of the 1994 Moscow Cease Fire Agreement.

13. (SBU) Other Georgian government officials also reacted strongly to the Russian decision. Deputy Minister for Reintegration Ruslan Abashidze told us on March 7 that the Russian Foreign Ministry statement calling for the

establishment of transport, economic and social links with Abkhazia sounds like establishing links between two independent states, despite Russian claims that its action was not a violation of Georgian sovereignty. He said Russia had no legal right to unilaterally pull out of a decision by the CIS Council of Heads of State. Abashidze speculated that the Georgian government might reconsider its position on the CIS peacekeeping mandate, adding that it was clear that Russia was a side in the conflict. He also noted that Russia was reportedly asking other CIS members to take the same steps with regard to the Decision. Publicly, both Foreign Minister Bakradze and Speaker Burjanadze strongly condemned Russia's decision. In a statement to the media, Bakradze called the decision "illegal and very dangerous" and warned that it would move Georgia-Russian relations to "a totally new dimension and Russia will bear the full responsibility for it." Burjanadze, speaking to the media in Brussels, echoed Bakradze's comments, calling Russia's decision "unacceptable."

Yakobashvili: Russia no longer an 'honest broker' in Abkhazia

14. (SBU) At a March 7 meeting with the Group of Friends (including Russia), Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili called the Russian MFA statement declaring Russia's withdrawal from the 1996 Decision to be "hostile" and "destructive," and said the reasons justifying the decision were simply not true. He said there has been no UNSC Resolution or Group of Friends decision that would remotely justify the Russian decision and he asked the western Friends to condemn the Russian MFA statement. The Georgian government particularly does not understand why Russia wants to open the possibility of arms exports to Abkhazia, he said, and argued that this demonstrates that Russia could no longer

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be considered by anyone to be an honest broker in Abkhazia. They are a "side" to the conflict, he said, and Georgia will consider them as such. At the same time, Yakobashvili emphasized that the Georgian government would continue to support the economic development proposals that he presented at the recent Group of Friends meeting in Geneva. (Note: These proposals encourage development in Abkhazia through Abkhaz-Georgian cooperation rather than lifting sanctions, which the Georgians believe ultimately support desires for Abkhaz independence rather than peaceful reintegration within Georgia. End note). Georgia is ready to begin joint police patrols of Gali with the Abkhaz, he said, and for the resumption of the Quadripartite meetings between the sides. He noted that the recent release of Georgian journalists after extensive talks between Georgian and Abkhaz officials showed that both sides can work together, quietly, "below the press radar."

CIS Sanctions not only economic, but military, political

15. (U) While the media, and the Russians themselves, have emphasized the economic and social impact of lifting the sanctions, the 1996 Decision clearly lists a far broader range of prohibited activities than have been reported publicly, including:

- a prohibition of all CIS member states to sell or supply arms, military equipment of all types, spare parts, ammunitions, military vehicles and equipment by their citizens or from their respective territories, or through their ships and aircraft to the conflict zone;

- a prohibition of any technical consultations, assistance or services in the field of staff training or on other issues relating to military arms and equipment to the Abkhaz side;

- a mandate to prevent enlisting in the service of military forces of the CIS member-states the citizens permanently

residing in the territories under the control of the Abkhaz side;

-- an article calling on CIS member states to prevent the recruitment of their citizens and their detachment to the conflict zone for participation in the activity of any armed formations;

-- a prohibition against the functioning of representatives of the authorities of the Abkhaz side in CIS member state territory and against any official CIS member state representative serving in an official capacity in Abkhazia.

Comment

16. (SBU) The Russian decision to withdraw from the 1996 CIS Decision, while not completely unexpected, has only served to inflame Georgian fears of a "creeping annexation" of Abkhazia by Russia. Russia already heavily invests in both conflict zones despite the decisions. Still, the formal lifting of the sanctions by Russia will not only open up the possibility of increased economic activity between Abkhazia and Russia - particularly important for Russia as it prepares for the 2014 Winter Olympics in neighboring Sochi - but also the potential for closer diplomatic, and possibly military, cooperation between the two sides, which would only exacerbate tensions in the volatile region. Interestingly, Russian Lieutenant General Valery Yevnevich was quoted March 6 saying that the all-Russian CIS peacekeeping force would not withdraw from the Abkhaz conflict zone unless instructed to do so by the CIS Council of Heads of State, which gave the peacekeepers their mandate. The Georgians are likely to ask why, if Russia can unilaterally pull out of a CIS decision on sanctions, they cannot renounce the CIS mandate for peacekeeping.

TEFFT